DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 340 UD 011 437

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TITLE Story-Setting Preferences of Inner-City Children.
PUB DATE Feb 71
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, N.Y., February 4-7, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Caucasian Students, *Elementary School Students, Illustrations, *Inner City, Mexican Americans, Negro Students, *Reading Material Selection, Socioeconomic Status, Story Reading, Story Telling, Student Attitudes, *Suburban Environment, *Urban Environment
IDENTIFIERS California, Texas

ABSTRACT

The study was designed to determine whether inner-city children of various ethnic groups prefer suburban or inner-city story settings. Subjects (Ss) participating were first-grade pupils from two large urban school districts in California and Texas. The student population in one school in each district was almost exclusively Negro; the population of a second was Caucasian; and, the third was Mexican-American. Ten boys and ten girls were randomly selected from the dominant ethnic group in one first-grade class at each of the six schools. Four pairs of 11 by 14 inch black-and-white illustrations were prepared for use as stimulus materials. Each pair depicted an environmental setting frequently appearing in the every-day experiences of children. One illustration depicted an inner-city scene representing the designated setting, the other a suburban scene. Each subject was shown one pair of illustrations at a time by the experimenter until he had responded to the four pairs. The 120 Ss selected an average of 2.47 suburban settings, or 62 percent, and 1.53 inner-city settings, or 38 percent. Both black children, 74 percent, and Caucasian children, 62 percent, selected suburban settings more often than inner-city settings. Mexican-American children selected the two types of settings approximately an equal number of times. [This document has been reproduced from the best available xerox copy of the paper.] (Author/DM)

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STORY-SETTING PREFERENCES OF INNER-CITY CHILDREN[1]

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Several factors have been cited as contributing to the relatively low reading achievement of inner-city children. The type of environmental settings most commonly depicted in children's reading stories is one such factor. Popular opinion holds that the settings in stories for young children should reflect their everyday environment and experiences. However, most stories in primary-grade reading series are set in suburban environments. The following comments are typical of the concern expressed over this matter as it affects the inner-city child:

> A change in content in the texts--from typically suburban living stories to typically urban ones--is badly needed [Hilburn, 1969, p. 38].
>
> It is crucial to disadvantaged youths to read materials to which they can respond--literature centered on themes and situations they can understand... [Cooper, 1969, p. 444].

Although a substantial amount of adult interest and opinion has been expressed on the topic of appropriate reading materials for inner-city children, there has been little research investigating the actual reading preferences of such children. Neither of the foregoing writers cited research evidence to support his recommendations. After a thorough review of the literature on children's interests and story

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preferences, Zimet (1968) reported that "researchers have grossly neglected the reading interests of the young child [p. 124]." Seldom have inner-city children been asked what they would like to read about.

The precarious nature of adult speculation concerning the interests of inner-city children is demonstrated by a study which did investigate the actual reading preferences of children (Emans, 1968). Of the sixteen adult subjects in the study, only one was able to accurately predict the story preferences of inner-city children. Fifteen of the sixteen adults had assumed that the children would prefer "city" stories to "family-friends-pets" stories. Emans found the reverse to be the case in both his original and replicated studies. Clearly, evidence on the actual reading preferences expressed by children themselves is important for the preparation of effective materials for reading instruction.

The present investigation was conducted to provide information regarding the most appropriate type of story settings for children's stories to be included in a primary-grade reading series currently being developed at the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. Specifically, the study was designed to determine whether inner-city children of various ethnic groups prefer suburban or inner-city story settings.

METHOD

Subjects

Ss participating in the study were first-grade pupils from two large urban school districts in California and Texas. (Estimated 1969 populations for the two cities were approximately 700,000 and 800,000, respectively.) Three inner-city schools in each district were selected by administrative personnel to provide within-school populations consisting predominantly of a single specified ethnic group. The student population in one school in each district was almost exclusively Negro; the population of a second was Caucasian; and the third was Mexican-American.

Ten boys and 10 girls were randomly selected from the dominant ethnic group in one first-grade class at each of the six schools. Thus, there were a total of 120 Ss equally representative of two geographical locations, both sexes, and three ethnic groups.

Materials

Four pairs of 11" x 14" black-and-white illustrations were prepared for use as stimulus materials. Each pair of illustrations depicted an environmental setting frequently appearing in the everyday experiences of children and appropriate as a setting for children's stories. The four environmental settings represented in the illustrations were (1) a school exterior, (2) a shopping area, (3) a house and yard and

(4) a living room. One illustration in each pair depicted an inner-city scene representing the designated setting; the other illustration depicted a suburban scene representing the setting. For example, the pair of illustrations for the school setting showed an inner-city school and a suburban school. The illustrations were prepared from actual photographs taken in inner-city and suburban Los Angeles. None of the illustrations included people.

Analysis of the illustrations indicated that the stimuli depicted in each pair differed primarily on the dimensions of architectural style, condition of maintenance, age, and estimated cost.

Procedure

Each S was shown one pair of illustrations at a time by the experimenter (E) until he had responded to all four pairs. As S was shown the first pair, he was given the following directions:

> "I have a friend who writes stories for children just like you. He wants to write a story about one of these two pictures but he doesn't know which of these two pictures you would most like to read about. Look carefully at these two pictures and tell me which picture you would rather read about."

E was instructed to expand on the directions whenever necessary until she was confident that S understood the nature of the task. E provided directions in Spanish for each S who did not adequately understand the directions in English. Left-to-right position of the pictures was alternated from S to S to prevent position preferences from biasing results, and the order of presenting the pairs was counterbalanced.

RESULTS

The observed distribution showing the number of suburban settings chosen by Ss and the theoretical chance distribution are shown in Table 1. The highest possible number of suburban settings chosen by a subject is 4, indicating that he chose the suburban setting over

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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the inner-city setting for all 4 pairs of illustrations. An entry under the "0" column indicates that S selected all 4 inner-city settings. The expected chance value based on the binomial distribution is 2.

It can be seen from Table 1 that a greater number of children showed a preference for the suburban settings than for the inner-city settings. Twenty-five Ss selected all 4 suburban settings, whereas only 6 Ss selected all inner-city settings. Similarly, 33 Ss selected 3 of the 4 suburban settings and only 15 Ss selected 3 inner-city settings.

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov one-sample test (Siegel, 1956) was applied to the data in Table 1 to compare the difference between the observed and expected distributions of scores. The obtained D of .17 is significant at the .01 level for a two-tailed test.

The mean number and percentage of suburban and inner-city settings selected by children of each ethnic group are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

As shown in the table, the 120 Ss selected an average of 2.47 suburban settings (62%) and 1.53 inner-city settings (38%). Both Black children (74%) and Caucasian children (62%) selected suburban settings more often than inner-city settings. Mexican-American children selected the two types of settings approximately an equal number of times.

The data for all subjects and for each ethnic group were tested for significance by comparing the difference between the observed mean number of suburban responses, as shown in Table 2, and the mean number (2.0) expected on the basis of chance. Statistically significant differences were obtained for all 120 Ss ($t=4.67$, $p<.001$), for Black children ($t=7.71$, $p<.001$), and for Caucasian children ($t=2.50$, $p<.05$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that stories set in a suburban type of environment will have greater appeal for inner-city first graders than will stories with inner-city settings. When inner-city children were given an opportunity to select illustrations of the type of setting about which they would prefer to read, the children showed a significant preference for suburban settings over inner-city

settings. Both Black children and Caucasian children manifested particularly strong preferences for the suburban-type environments.

An interesting aspect of the study is the fact that the results contradict much of the popular adult opinion regarding the type of story settings that are most appropriate for inner-city children. Like the results obtained by Emans (1968), the present data indicate the questionable validity of subjective adult judgments concerning the reading preferences of children. Both Emans' findings and the current study clearly demonstrate the need for obtaining empirical evidence regarding children's preferences from the children themselves.

There is certainly no dearth of potential research topics for attempting to identify types of reading stories that will have high appeal for young children. Story setting is but one such topic. Others include type of plot, theme, characters and illustration style. More systematic study of children's expressed and observed preferences in these areas is needed to provide valid information that can be used to plan and develop reading stories with greater appeal for children.

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TABLE 1

PREFERENCE FREQUENCIES

	Number of Suburban Settings Chosen				
	0	1	2	3	4
Observed Distribution of Subjects	6	15	41	33	25
Expected Distribution of Subjects	7.5	30	45	30	7.5

N = 120 Ss (40 per ethnic group) Kolmogorov-Smirnov D = .17 ($p < .01$)

TABLE 2

ETHNIC GROUP PREFERENCES

	Mean Responses by Ethnic Group			
Type of Setting	Mexican-American	Negro	Caucasian	Totals
Suburban	1.95 (49%)	2.95 (74%)	2.50 (62%)	2.47 (62%)
Inner-City	2.05 (51%)	1.05 (26%)	1.50 (38%)	1.53 (38%)

N = 120 Ss (40 per ethnic group)

Responses shown in Table 2 differ significantly from chance for all children ($t=4.67$, $p < .001$), for Black children ($t=7.71$, $p < .001$), and for Caucasian children ($t=2.50$, $p < .05$).

[1]This sheet is a handout to accompany a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, February 4-7, 1971.